

# Deep Tunnel opens



Deep Tunnel, or the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, and other pollution-control efforts have prompted planners and developers to take advantage of the river's dramatic setting. One example is this walkway with a fountain and water cannon. (Tribune photo by Gerald West)

By **Casey Bukro**  
Chicago Tribune

**S**uperlatives filled the air at the dedication on this date of 31 miles of tunnels that had been constructed deep underground, the first section of a vast project to control water pollution and flooding in the Chicago area. The Deep Tunnel "is the largest undertaking of its kind ever attempted by mankind," declared Raymond Rimkus, general superintendent of the Metropolitan Sanitary District of Greater Chicago, the agency that planned the project. For once, many of the superlatives were deserved. The Deep Tunnel, or the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, was the largest public works project in Chicago's history and one of the biggest in the U.S. The tunnel system, which is still under construction, will be 130 miles long when finished, each inch bored out of rock 150 to 350 feet below the surface. Its estimated cost is \$3.6 billion.

With the reversal of the Chicago River in 1900, the city's sewage was directed away from Lake Michigan, its drinking water source. But during severe storms, sewage-tainted storm water still backed up into the lake. In addition, one of the consequences of the continued development of the flat metropolitan region was that storms frequently flooded basements--or worse. In 1954 and 1957, the Chicago River overflowed and flooded downtown Chicago.

The Deep Tunnel is intended to "bottle a rainstorm" by channeling storm water that overflows from sewers into the system's tunnels, which are up to 33 feet in diameter. The tunnels will connect with massive reservoirs, which are to be finished in the early 21st Century. When complete, the system will have a capacity of 41 billion gallons. In the meantime, the completed tunnels are put to use to hold storm water that is pumped to a sewage treatment plant after a storm to be cleaned up.

The Deep Tunnel is the biggest and most ambitious project to attack the problem of pollution in area streams and Lake Michigan. Other efforts include federal and local laws to restrict discharges of industrial pollution into waterways and improved sewage treatment facilities. The Tribune chronicled and sometimes spurred those battles, most notably with its "Save Our Lake" campaign, launched in 1967, that focused on pollution of the Great Lakes and particularly Lake Michigan. By the 1990s, periodic testing by the sanitary district--renamed the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District-- showed marked declines in many water pollutants.

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